

The Effect of Giving

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

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Luke 5:1–11 (CEB)

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word.² Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets.³ Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.⁴ When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets."

⁶ So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting.⁷ They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink.⁸ When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!"⁹ Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught.¹⁰ James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too.

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people."¹¹ **As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.**

Deuteronomy 14:28–29 (CEB)

²⁸ Every third year you must bring the tenth-part of your produce from that year and leave it at your city gates.²⁹ Then the Levites, who have no designated inheritance like you do, along with the immigrants, orphans, and widows who live in your cities, will come and feast until they are full. Do this so that the LORD your God might bless you in everything you do.

Malachi 3:8–12 (NIV)

⁸ "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'

"In tithes and offerings."⁹ You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me.¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.¹¹ I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the LORD Almighty.¹² "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

2 Corinthians 8:1–9 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, we want to let you know about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia.² While they were being tested by many problems, their extra amount of happiness and their extreme poverty resulted in a surplus of rich generosity.³ I assure you that they gave what they could afford and even more than they could afford, and they did it voluntarily.⁴ They urgently begged us for the privilege of sharing in this service for the saints.⁵ They even exceeded our expectations, because they gave themselves to the Lord first and to us, consistent with God's will.⁶ As a result, we challenged Titus to finish this work of grace with you the way he had started it.

⁷ Be the best in this work of grace in the same way that you are the best in everything, such as faith, speech, knowledge, total commitment, and the love we inspired in you.⁸ I'm not giving an order, but by mentioning the commitment of others, I'm trying to prove the authenticity of your love also.⁹ You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.

A faithful heart is a generous heart is a life poured out for God and neighbor.

They left everything and followed Jesus . . . What do you think Luke means by everything? Could these men really have left behind their families, their fishing business, and all the stuff that they had accumulated? In a word – yes. Jesus demanded no less than total commitment from those who followed. He was ushering in God's kingdom and halfway measures had no place. *Your dad needs a proper burial. Leave*

that to others, your place is with Jesus (Matthew 8:21-22). . . . None of you who are unwilling to give up all your possessions can be my disciple (Luke 14:23). Total commitment. As we put it in a previous sermon series, *All-in* and nothing less.

Little wonder that congregations get nervous when the pastor starts talking about money. So does the pastor. How does commitment translate into the annual giving campaign and our ministry budgets? Does God really want us to sell all we have and take on a life of poverty? I think not (though maybe I hope not!). When Jesus met a rich tax collector, he didn't ask that of Zacchaeus. Are we even to think that Peter liquidated his business and his property, leaving his wife destitute as he headed off to follow Jesus? No, I think not. But does God ask us, demand of us, to go further than we have, often much further? The answer is certainly "yes."

After all, the passages above from Deuteronomy, Malachi, and 2 Corinthians are all about money – right? Yes and no. Money is the immediate subject at hand, but the real issues, lying just beneath the surface, are love and trust. God's love for us. Our love for God. Our love for one another. Our trust in God.

So often, it seems that as soon as the word "tithe" is uttered, thoughts and feelings turn to "obligation" and "pre-tax or after-tax." The truth is that American churches, including our own, fall far short of giving back a tenth of our income (our harvest). So if we are going to grasp the message from Malachi, for example, we have to go back to the basics.

A cheerful and generous giver

God created us out of love, not necessity. We were created to love -- specifically, to love God (Deut. 6:4) and to love our neighbor (Lev. 19:18). As Jesus explained to the lawyer (Luke 10:27), this love is the essence of God's teachings. Further, these loving relationships are to be expressed in faithfulness, in trust. The biblical story is of a God who is utterly faithful to his people even though they run away from God far more often than they walk toward him. It is faith and faith alone that puts us in a right relationship with God.

In today's passage from Malachi, God reaches out yet again, "Return to me and I will return to you" (3:6). Despite the people's ongoing abandonment of God and the ways of God, he still pursues them, unwilling to abandon them. When Malachi brings the charge that the people are robbing God, the unpaid tithe is only a surface issue. God's people rob God when they (we!) deny God their prayers and praise. We rob God when we skip worship. We rob God when we ignore those in need. We rob God when we water down the truth about God. We rob God when we fail to proclaim the Good News of God's Son.

As Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about their participation in the collection for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem, he not only reminds them that "God loves a cheerful giver" but he encourages them toward the generosity that marks a loving heart. Paul lifts up to them the example of the struggling Christians in Macedonia whose "abundant joy" and "extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity." There is no sense of obligation in Macedonia, no struggling with "pre-tax" or "post-tax." There is only generosity pouring out of changed hearts. Still today, generous giving to others is predicated on a changed heart; only then does the giving change from duty to love.

And through it all, Paul points the Corinthians to the example of Christ: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you may become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). My own generosity with my money, even if I gave away all that I possess, would still pale next to Jesus' willingness to be nailed to that cross.

But is it a bargain struck?

It's a mistake to read a passage like today's from Malachi as some sort of tit-for-tat bargain between God and his people. Pay the tithe and I'll reward you with lots of blessings. Send in your money and you'll get that promotion or new job.

As Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, "That crude bargain is not what is involved here when Judah is admonished to 'bring the full tithe' (v. 10). Motivating and accompanying all true gifts to God is the pouring out of our life, our love, our all. And when we so present ourselves, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, it is surely true that heaven's richest bounties are heaped upon us. . . . We find ourselves given graces anew every morning, too numerous to count—the glories of a good creation; joy in daily work; patience, kindness, self-control in the fellowship we have with one another; release from guilt and anxiety and dread of death; and above all, peace with God, who winds us round and round with mercy, as if with air. The Kingdom's goal—the glory of God—becomes our chief occupation, and we find all these other things added to us as well."

Isn't the tithe just an Old Testament practice?

No. The biblical tithe was woven into the religious practices of God's people. There were offerings and taxes for a variety of purposes. But the tithe was for sacred purposes, given for God's priests, for the temple, and some even for the poor. Jesus didn't set aside the tithe. Why would he? Granted Jesus took to task those who prided themselves on tithing even of their spices while ignoring the larger matters of loving God and neighbor (Matthew 23:23-24). But Jesus kept God's Law and would certainly have given his tithe, as would have Peter, Andrew, and the rest. Not out of pride or obligation. They would have given out their love for God, knowing that their giving was the incarnation of their faith.

Paul's Collection for Jerusalem

In his letter to the Galatians (2:1-10), Paul tells the story of a meeting in Jerusalem to settle the question of whether Gentile converts must first become Jews in order to become followers of Jesus; namely, whether they must be circumcised and keep the Law (see Acts 15 also).

The leaders of the Christian community, James, Peter, and John (the "pillars" as Paul describes them) agree with Paul that circumcision was not a requirement. All that marks out the body of Christ is faith in Christ. They also agree on a division of labor. James and the other pillars will continue to work among their fellow Jews, bringing to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul (and Barnabas) would go to the Gentiles.

All that the pillars ask of Paul and Barnabas is that they "remember the poor," which Paul is "eager to do" (Galatians 2:10). This seems at first glance like a general request, but we find in Paul's letters that this is actually a specific mission.

The "poor" in mind here are the poverty-stricken among the Christian community in Jerusalem, all of whom are Jews who have embraced Jesus as Messiah. Indeed, most scholars agree that poverty characterized the entire Christian community in Jerusalem. There were surely a variety of factors at work, such as persecution by the Jewish authorities and a series of bad harvests in the mid-forties AD. The Christians' practice of using capital to meet current needs (the selling of property described in Acts 4 and 5) may also have contributed.

In any event, Paul undertakes throughout his missionary travels to collect money that he and a large contingent of Gentile Christians plan to take to Jerusalem. It seems that his appeal met with little success in the churches of Galatia but, as in today's passage, was embraced beyond his expectations by the churches in Macedonia (i.e., Thessalonica and Philippi). The Christians in Corinth had made a commitment to the collection and Paul urges them to follow through on their commitment (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).

Freeing Our Hearts for Generosity

Thomas Aquinas set up *generosity* as the opposite of greed/avarice. But he used the word *liberality* (freedom), for generosity flows from being free from attachment to money or what it can buy. Take a moment and consider all the stuff you have. Do you feel like it sets you free or does it seem more like burden? How much of it would you really miss if it disappeared tomorrow? Overcoming avarice and greed requires us to embrace generosity. But here's the tricky part. We aren't talking about what we do so much, as why we do it, for escaping avarice is a matter of the heart. Rebecca DeYoung writes:

"This condition of the heart is the key to generosity. Generosity's measure is not how much is given away, in terms of the flat amount, but rather the way it is given: the manner of giving reveals the inner desires and attachments of the giver. In Luke's Gospel the widow gives away her last two copper coins out of devotion to the Lord, and Jesus commends her (Luke 21: 1– 4). Her coins couldn't buy a single church bulletin, but even in her poverty, her love and devotion made her willing to give. Likewise, the gospels recount the costly gift of a newly cut tomb for Jesus's body, given by a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27: 57– 60). The mark of generosity is not the size of the gift, or the wealth of the giver, but the readiness to give what one does have to God."¹

Why is it so hard for us to turn away from greed, to surrender our attachment to money and what it buys. How do we really avoid the future that awaited the rich man who sadly walked away from Jesus? DeYoung summarizes the problem:

"The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil," says the apostle Paul (1 Tim. 6: 10). Why is that? Because money is so attractive that we will commit many sins in order to acquire it? Or because money gives us the power to satisfy any sinful desire— and then get away with sin by buying influence or immunity? Even more, perhaps, loving money is the root of evil when having money itself becomes the goal. Aquinas argues that human beings are tempted to seek material wealth because it gives us the illusion of self-sufficiency— and therefore serves as a powerful incentive to deny our need for God. Who among us would want to give up the power to make ourselves comfortable and secure in this world? The possession of money represents this self-sufficiency and the power to secure it, and is a convenient and much less demanding replacement for God."

1. from Rebecca DeYoung's book on the deadly sins, *Glittering Vices*.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What holds us back from making a total commitment to the life of discipleship? What tensions do you feel between your life with God and making your way in this world? How could we help ourselves to go all-in, to make a total commitment to our faith?
2. In his commentary on Paul's letter, Sampley tells the story of a church whose members decided that in addition to their regular annual financial pledge, they would give to missions 10% of all the money they received unexpectedly – gifts, repayment of written-off debts, money that had been found, etc. They committed themselves to giving away 10% of all the little moments of abundance that popped up in their lives. How might you put such a plan into practice in your own life and family? How much money might we be talking about? How could we make our children part of this? If we our entire congregation practiced this, how much money might we raise for missions? What might we learn?
3. How is my life richer in the things money cannot buy than it was a year ago? From where did my blessings come? When and why do I most enjoy giving? Why do I want to give to support my church?

Weekly Prayer List

During the week, jot down the names of people who need your prayers.
Such prayers bind you to them in the presence of God.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Malachi 3:7-15 God calls for his people to return to him and then he will return to them.	Tuesday, Galatians 2:1-10 In v. 10 Paul speaks of this work for the poor in Jerusalem.
Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 Paul's instructions regarding the collection for the saints. Each person's giving is to be commensurate with their income.	Thursday, Ephesians 3:1-13 Paul's ministry to the Gentiles
Friday, Romans 15:25-32 Paul speaks about the final stages of the collection as he prepares to take it to Jerusalem.	Saturday, Acts 11:27-30 & 24:17 More references to the ministry of giving among the early Christians.

